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The Thing in the Gap-stone Style: Alice Oswald's Acoustic Arrangements

'Before writing', says Alice Oswald, 'I always spend a certain amount of time preparing my listening. I might take a day or sometimes as much as a month picking up the rhythms I find, either in other poems or in the world around me'.¹ In concert with Oswald's role as listener, the focus of this essay will be on listening to the carefully selected rhythms of her poems. Oswald's verse is as rhythmical as it is unpredictable and in order to decipher the rich phonic texture of her poetry, the reader must first prepare their own listening and engage in what the composer and acoustic ecologist R. Murray Schafer refers to as an exercise in 'ear cleaning'.² 'Listen Listen Listen Listen', writes Oswald in 'A Greyhound in the Evening after a Long Day of Rain', the second poem of her first collection, *The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile* (1996).³ The purpose of this study is to undertake such an acoustic exercise, fine-tuning the ear to the subtleties and nuances of Oswald's prosody. An enquiry into the nature of Oswald's versification is also dependent upon a gathering together of her acoustic influences: the writers from who she has learnt her craft, but also her non-literary influences, those manual labourers who have forged a connection with the land by working upon it and listening to it.

¹ Alice Oswald, 'Poetry for Beginners,' *BBC Get Writing*, accessed May 5, 2013, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080211213547/http://-www.bbc.co.uk/dna/getwriting/module18p>.

² R. Murray Schafer, *Ear Cleaning: Notes for an Experimental Music Course* (Toronto: Berandol Music Limited, 1969); see also: R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1994), 208-211.

³ Alice Oswald, 'A Greyhound in the Evening after a Long Day of Rain,' *The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2.

One such influential figure is the writer, broadcaster and conservationist Roger Deakin. In his journal, Deakin raises the question of ‘how a writer connects with the land’:

The answer is through work. Look at John Clare, working on the land, knowing it by working on it and being in it for years from earliest childhood. Look at Alice Oswald, working as a gardener for six years, living in Devon[.]⁴

Deakin's remarks gesture towards the significance of work in relation to Oswald's poetics of place, suggesting that a place is not just a ‘seen’ environment but a felt and heard one.

Derived from the term *landmark*, Schafer defines the ‘unique tones’ of particular geographies with the term ‘soundmark’.⁵ Sam Ward has identified the usefulness of such terminology in relation to Clare's representations of the working soundscape of Northamptonshire.⁶ On a similar note, Mary Pinard has observed the impact of the acoustic ecology movement upon Oswald's verse in relation to her role as gardener.⁷ However, the ‘soundmarks’ which characterise Oswald's Devonshire environment still have plenty to offer the attentive listener. As Oswald's following acoustic census makes clear, working outside exposes both poet and reader to a diverse range of noises and rhythms:

Machinery, spade-scrapes, birdsong, gravel, rain on polythene, macks moving, aeroplanes, seeds kept in paper, potatoes coming out of boxes, high small leaves or large head-height leaves being shaken, frost on grass, strimmers, hoses... also, when you look up, (and your eyes are still half in your ears) the modulation of outlines, the landscape as a physical score, the periodicity of things – weather, daylight, woods, all long unstable rhythms and dissonance.⁸

In her poetry, Oswald actively re-writes ‘the landscape as a physical score’. Sensitive to the tiniest seeds of sounds, but also to the largest and most complex of rhythms, Oswald's verse accommodates the vast range of frequencies found in the environment. Key to Oswald's

⁴ Roger Deakin, *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*, ed. Alison Hastie and Terence Blacker (London: Penguin, 2009), 162-163.

⁵ Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, 26.

⁶ Sam Ward, “‘To list the song & not to start the thrush’: John Clare's Acoustic Ecologies,” *John Clare Society Journal* 29 (2009): 15-32.

⁷ Mary Pinard, ‘Voice(s) of the Poet-Gardener: Alice Oswald and the Poetry of Acoustic Encounter,’ *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: a journal of criticism and theory* 10, no. 2 (2009): 17-39.

⁸ Alice Oswald, ‘The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise,’ in *a green thought in a green shade: poetry in the garden*, ed. Sarah Maguire (London: The Poetry Society, 2000), 35-36.

sense of place is also the work which enables the individual to tune in to seasonal cycles, as evidenced here in the 'spade scrapes', the 'trimmers' and the 'hoses' accompanying the natural soundscape.

Oswald's most comprehensive acoustic survey of place takes the form of *Dart* (2002), an extended poem which traces the journey of the river Dart in Devon from source to estuary. The poem is made up of the voices of those 'who live and work on the Dart' and among them is the 'stonewaller': 'I can read them, volcanic, sedimentary, red sandstone, they all nest in the Dart [...] I'm a gatherer, an amateur, a scavenger, a comber, my whole style's a stone wall'.⁹ Oswald's 'stonewaller' resembles Lévi-Strauss's 'bricoleur', an individual who makes do 'with "whatever is at hand", that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite'.¹⁰ In writing *Dart*, Oswald exhibits a stone wall style herself; the poem's interlocking poetry and prose arose out of an extended oral census of the river conducted by Oswald over a period of three years. Echoing how a 'stonewaller' constructs forms by 'just wedging together what happens to be lying about at the time', Oswald used interviews with the inhabitants of the Dart as the raw materials for the poem, creating an acoustic bricolage by 'linking their voices into a sound-map of the river'.¹¹ Just as the 'stonewaller' is able to 'read' the diverse geology of the landscape, Oswald displays remarkable skill herself in carefully selecting and arranging acoustic materials from the environment. 'Slowing down, stopping yourself completely, to read and understand a poem is like trying to acquire an old-fashioned skill like drystone walling or trout tickling', writes Ian McEwan in his novel *Saturday*.¹² Any attempt to 'read' into Oswald's versification must therefore account for her dry-stone style of

⁹ Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), i, 33.

¹⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind (La Pensée Sauvage)* (London: Weidenfeld And Nicolson, 1966), 17.

¹¹ Oswald, *Dart*, 33; Oswald, *Dart*, i.

¹² Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006), 129.

writing and slow down the reading process, remaining sensitive to the fact that each unit of sound has been carefully sourced and positioned according to its rhythmical properties.

The foundations of Oswald's dry-stone style can be quarried from her interest in Homer. Oswald observes that an 'oral poet - and Homer was one (or several) - works in chorus with his predecessors, learning from them a repertoire of rhythmical phrases that enable him to compose spontaneously in metre'.¹³ Like any dry-stone structure, oral poetry is composed from pre-existing verbal material which is newly assembled rather than created from scratch by an individual. The oral poet must work 'in chorus' with the polished and shaped 'rhythmical phrases' of a long history of composition. The resulting form is, in Oswald's words, 'like a cairn', a dry-stone monument to the oral tradition.¹⁴ It is fitting that Oswald entitled her translation of Homer's *Iliad* as *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad* (2011), presenting 'the whole poem as a kind of oral cemetery' by recovering its rhythms as artefacts and reassembling them into new structures.¹⁵

Oswald's engagement with Homer extends beyond her role as translator. Working out of the oral tradition, she re-applies Homer's techniques to her own verse. Reading *The Iliad* Oswald was struck by what was 'happening outside the language, not on the level of individual words, but in the contacts and spaces between them'. Oswald puts this effect down the oral nature of *The Iliad*'s composition and the way the grammar is organised as a result: '— it proceeds by adding quick connectives ('and' and 'but') instead of complex causal ones. You could call it a dry-stone syntax, as opposed to a cemented one.'¹⁶ In the process of dry stone walling, building blocks are assembled according to a criteria of juxtaposition and volume as opposed to a predetermined sequence or pattern. Thus, each unit of a dry-stone

¹³ Alice Oswald, 'The unbearable brightness of speaking,' *The New Statesman*, Oct 17, 2011, accessed May 5, 2013, <http://www.newstatesman.com/-books/2011/10/homer-essay-iliad-poetry-poem>.

¹⁴ Oswald, 'The unbearable brightness of speaking.'

¹⁵ Alice Oswald, *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 2.

¹⁶ Alice Oswald, 'Memorial,' *PBS Bulletin* 231 (Winter 2011): 14.

wall is as important as any other. Homer's 'dry-stone syntax' materialises this formation linguistically, creating a paratactic relationship between clauses by co-ordinating rather than subordinating 'rhythmical blocks'. This is also the technique of the 'bricoleur', who 'does not subordinate [tasks] to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project.'¹⁷ Oswald too is interested in coordination rather than subordination, as she seeks 'a much more democratic way of seeing the world'.¹⁸ The lack of hypotactic cement in Homer's language and the resulting 'cracked texture of his syntax' emphasises for Oswald the significance of the 'silent matter' between words, rather than the semantic or syntactic significance of the language itself.¹⁹ The presence of this 'silent matter', contributing to what Oswald calls 'the *Iliad's* porousness', gives Homer's poetry an agency independent of its author.²⁰

'All my poems have been translations of that pattern', claims Oswald, who seeks to make her rhythms just as 'loose and lateral in their connections' as she finds them in Homer.²¹ In the title poem of her first collection, *The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile*, Oswald's gap-stone *style* allows for similar moments of authorial absence:

What I did do (I am a gap)
was lean these elbows on a wall
and sat on my hunkers pervading the boulders.

My pose became the pass across two kingdoms,
before behind antiphonal, my cavity the chord.

And I certainly intended
anyone to be almost
abstracted on a gap-stone between fields.²²

¹⁷ Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind (La Pensée Sauvage)*, 17.

¹⁸ Madeleine Bunting and Alice Oswald, 'Alice Oswald on the Devonshire landscape: "There's a terror in beauty"', *The Guardian*, July 13, 2012, accessed July 15, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jul/13/alice-oswald-devonshire-landscape?INTCMP=SRCH>.

¹⁹ Oswald, 'The unbearable brightness of speaking'; Oswald, 'Memorial,' *PBS Bulletin* 231, 14.

²⁰ Oswald, 'The unbearable brightness of speaking.'

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Alice Oswald, 'The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile,' *The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile*, 30.

Deeply mistrusting of the anthropocentric poetic tradition, Oswald persistently abstracts the self in relation to nature: 'I exert incredible amounts of energy in trying to see things from their own point of view rather than the human point of view', she claims in an interview.²³ Hence the speaker in 'The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile' is just that: a non-human 'thing' that denies the listener a fully anthropocentric perspective. The carefully arranged rhythmical structure of the poem enables Oswald to access irregular channels of subjectivity. The point of intersection, the 'gap' between the speaker and the environment, becomes a passage in which two conflicting perspectives, or 'kingdoms,' can collide, with the phrase 'my pose became the pass' itself passing through *pause*. The caesura, which opens up a pause between 'before behind antiphonal' and 'my cavity the chord', positions these two alliterative phrases in conversation with each other through a process of antiphony. The resulting 'cavity' is a space in which both the rhythms of the speaker and the environment are harmonised. In this sense, the abstracted form of the speaker is a musical 'chord' made up of a multiplicity of notes arising out of the soundscape, abstracting the 'anyone' who is listening to the poem. The 'cavity' is also a cord that prevents the gap-stone structure of the poem from crumbling.

Oswald positions herself in the gap between two traditions. One tradition is rhythmical, with its origins in English alliterative verse, reaching her through Sir Thomas Wyatt and Gerard Manley Hopkins. The other is made up of poets who are also manual labourers, and includes, among others, John Clare, Robert Frost and Seamus Heaney. Positioning herself between these two lineages, Oswald employs antiphony in order to harmonise them; her environmental and her prosodic concerns are intricately woven together, with rhythm being the primary means by which she engages with the environment. Oswald inherits her position between these two fields from the poet laureate and environmentalist, Ted Hughes. Taking her inspiration from the oral tradition, Oswald 'works in chorus with

²³ Bunting and Oswald, 'Alice Oswald on the Devonshire landscape: "There's a terror in beauty".'

[her] predecessors', learning from them a repertoire of techniques and practices, and this is nowhere more significant than in her relationship with Hughes. The most effective way of tuning into Oswald's harmonising of versification and environmentalism, therefore, is through her exposure to Hughes's work.

In her 2005 Ted Hughes memorial lecture, Oswald explains how reading Hughes's poetry engendered a new way of writing the environment:

It was a new idea to me – that instead of describing something (which always involves a separation between you and the object) you could replay it alive in the form of sound. You could use poetry to reveal what it sounds like being outdoors: the overlapping of thousands of different noises: the rain's rhythm, the wind's rhythm in the leaves, the tunes of engines, the beat of footsteps. The technical term for this is counterpoint. If there's one thing Hughes is brilliant at, it's counterpoint. That's why his poems sound deeper and wider and richer than human language. They seem to include the whole sacred and speechless background of nature.²⁴

The technique of counterpoint, when 'two rhythms are in some manner running at once', reaches Hughes through Coleridge and Hopkins.²⁵ For Hughes, when reading the multi-dimensional prosody of both of these poets 'the voice has to make a shift, from the speaking mode to what – for want of the right word – one might call the "performing" mode'.²⁶ Hughes's own syncopations enable Oswald to 'replay it alive in the form of sound' and become an active participant in the environment. The significance of Hughes's use of counterpoint extends beyond the bounds of individual poems. Harmonising a rhythmical virtuosity with an environmental ethics, Hughes counterpoints task and technique in order to fashion what can be defined as an eco-prosody. For Oswald, Hughes's dynamic versification

²⁴Alice Oswald, 'Wild things,' *The Guardian*, Dec 3, 2005, accessed June 21, 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/dec/03/poetry.tedhughes - an edited extract from Alice Oswald's 2005 Ted Hughes Memorial Lecture.

²⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Author's Preface,' in *Selected Poetry*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 95.

²⁶ Ted Hughes, 'Myths, Metres, Rhythms,' in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (New York, Picador USA, 1995), 334.

not only offers a new way of reading the environment, but provides the rhythmical blueprints for her own 'soundmarks' in the form of poems.

If the task of the writer is to connect with the world through stress rhythms, then both Hughes and Oswald stress the importance of the role of listening in making this connection. In a review of Max Nicholson's *The Environmental Revolution* (1970), Hughes condemns the sense of sight's monopoly on the human sensorium:

while the mice in the field are listening to the Universe, and moving in the body of nature, where every living cell is sacred to every other, and all are interdependent, the Developer is peering at the field through a visor[.]²⁷

Hughes's dichotomy of field mouse and 'Developer' is also a dichotomy of the senses. The act of listening connects the mouse with its surroundings, whereas the 'visor' of looking only serves to separate man and nature, or even worse, encourage man's abuse of nature. Hughes's argument forms part of a *consensual* agreement across various disciplines on the roles of sight and sound. The psychologist Stephen Handel argues that 'looking makes each of us a focused observer, listening makes each of us a surrounded participant', whereas the anthropologist Tim Ingold states that 'it would seem that whereas you participate aurally, you observe visually'.²⁸ For Oswald too, participation in the environment is dependent upon being able to listen: 'the eye is an instrument tuned to surfaces, but the ear tells you about volume, depth, content [...] The ear hears into, not just at what surrounds it'.²⁹ The acoustic richness of Hughes's verse offers Oswald an antidote to the 'flavour of absence' which she finds in the post-enlightenment 'lyrical, romantic, pastoral tradition of "Nature Poetry"'.³⁰ Oswald complains that in the vast majority of verse labelled nature poetry, the environment, almost

²⁷ Ted Hughes, 'The Environmental Revolution,' in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, 130.

²⁸ Stephen Handel, *Listening: An Introduction to the Perception of Auditory Events* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 547; Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2000), 244.

²⁹ Oswald, 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise,' 37.

³⁰ Oswald, 'Wild things.'

always described in terms of landscape, is perceived at one remove, 'as if the poet was sitting on a rock on a hill looking at the world through a telescope.'³¹ In Hughes's poetry, on the other hand, for Oswald, nature has a 'verbal presence', one which can communicate the depth, volume and the complexity of the soundscape.³²

As the inheritor of Hughes's eco-prosody, Oswald can be said to be part of a prosodic geology as well as a genealogy. Hughes's *Moortown Diary* (1989) is comprised of poems which Hughes labels 'casual journal notes' of his time farming on the edge of Dartmoor.³³ Whereas Hughes's early work evokes the West Yorkshire moors environment of his childhood, Oswald observes that in the *Moortown* poems 'you really smell Devon for the first time: the softer rhythms, the moisture, the sheer delight. You could almost call them clay-based poems, whereas previously they've been written on millstone grit'.³⁴ The softer rhythms that Oswald senses in *Moortown Diary* form part of what Gilles identifies in the poetry of Norman MacCaig as 'a metre of landscape', in which a landscape 'can become a poetry, in its scale and stress and in its intervals'.³⁵ In this regard, the distinct rhythmical contours and acoustic textures of *Moortown Diary* make its versification 'site specific'.³⁶ Oswald's dry-stone style is as much a signature of local knowledge as it is of a literary tradition. Her first collection, *The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile*, was composed while she was working as a professional gardener in Devon, while her second book, *Dart*, is as much embedded in the Devonshire landscape as the river itself. Seamus Heaney states that 'there are two ways in which a place is known [...] One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious'.³⁷ Working on and writing from the same territory as

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Ted Hughes, 'Preface' to *Moortown Diary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), xi.

³⁴ Oswald, 'Wild things.'

³⁵ Valerie Gilles, 'A Metre of Landscape,' in *Norman MacCaig: Critical Essays*, ed. Joy Hendry and Raymond Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 156.

³⁶ Oswald, 'Wild things.'

³⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'The Sense of Place,' in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 131.

Hughes, Oswald counterpoints the tension between these two notions in order to utilise a poetics in which the lived (labour) and the learned (literature) are interdependent.

The title of Oswald's first collection, *The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile*, commemorates the 'sprung rhythm' of Hopkins and Hughes. The opening poem, 'Pruning in Frost', synthesises the rhythms of gardening and writing, as Oswald constructs a working account of being outdoors. There are echoes of Hughes's 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' here, as she reduces the volume of the poem to an almost inaudible hush:

Last night, without a sound,
a ghost of a world lay down on a world,

trees like dream-wrecks
coralled with increments of frost.³⁸

In these lines, the ghosting phenomenon that occurs when a landscape is covered in frost is given acoustic treatment by Oswald. The caesura in 'Last night, without a sound' snaps it off in the centre, creating a symmetrical pattern of two beats. The repetition of 'world' creates an uncanny ghosting effect, one which is enhanced by Oswald's laying of one metrical pattern over another: the rhythm of 'lay down on a world' fits 'a ghost of a world' like a prosodic glove. Additionally, the subtle echoing of 'ghost' in 'frost' is itself a ghost of a rhyme. Oswald's rhythms are incremental, adding depth to her acoustic shaping of her experience working outside. The lines are carefully pruned, enabling Oswald to cultivate gaps in her language. 'Poetry is only there to frame the silence', she claims elsewhere and in 'Pruning in Frost', these gaps of 'silence' in between the words create the opportunity for other, non-human voices to infiltrate her language.³⁹

³⁸ Alice Oswald, 'Pruning in Frost,' *The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile*, 1.

³⁹ Kate Kellaway and Alice Oswald, 'Into the woods,' *The Observer*, June 19, 2005, accessed June 12, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/-jun/19/poetry.features?INTCMP=SRCH>.

Oswald comes into contact with silence through the poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt, a writer who she reads ‘in the context of the “pausing” tradition’.⁴⁰ For Oswald, Wyatt provides an alternative to the way in which ‘English literature is creased into the iambic system’.⁴¹ Oswald argues that whereas the iambic line is used to ‘ease the process’ of reading, Wyatt – who Oswald labels as a ‘fear poet’ – confronts the reader with the ‘unstable rhythm of quiet and disquiet’.⁴² For Oswald, the disquieting effect of Wyatt’s verse has to do ‘with the echo and opposition of real sounds within one line. It needs to proceed much more slowly, because the centre upon which the meanings converge lies outside the language, in the pauses’.⁴³ Wyatt’s pauses are the equivalent to ‘a twist of the head’, acting like a ‘hinge’ on which the reader can double back on the verse, helping to keep the meaning of the poem restless and mobile.⁴⁴ For Oswald, Wyatt’s versification achieves a catechism effect, a call and catch structure similar to antiphony, which keeps the reader alive in the middle of the poem, rather than running down the iambic path in search for the meaning.

Excavating her rhythmical techniques from writers such as Wyatt, Hopkins and Hughes, Oswald implements a wide range of methods to slow down the reading process in her own verse, encouraging the reader to stop and to listen within the walled garden of the poem, as illustrated in these lines from ‘Pruning in Frost’:

Found crevices
and wound and wound
the clock-spring cobwebs.

All life's ribbon frozen mid-fling.

⁴⁰ Alice Oswald, ‘Introduction,’ to *Sir Thomas Wyatt: Poems selected by Alice Oswald*, ed. Alice Oswald (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), xiv.

⁴¹ Oswald, ‘Introduction,’ to *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, xiv.

⁴² *Ibid.*, ix, xvi.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv.

In the same way that the ‘frost’ finds and fills the crevices in the landscape, it also penetrates silent spaces in Oswald’s poetry. To create the effect of a landscape under stress, Oswald employs a stress based rhythm which is alive with kinetic energy, emphasised here in the sprung rhyme of ‘spring’ and ‘fling’. The repetition of ‘wound’ creates the sense that the poem is tightening under the grip of frost: the lines themselves are brittle, with only a few unstressed syllables sounded in each. The symmetry of ‘All life's ribbon frozen mid-fling’, with the pronounced spondees at either end of the line, acts like a sonic freeze-frame, exposing the pauses and the gaps left by Oswald’s prosodic pruning shears.

Having made the connection between working, writing and the land, Roger Deakin refines his argument by asking ‘and when we work on the land, what is our connection with it? Tools, and especially hand tools.’⁴⁵ For Deakin, and indeed for Oswald, the instruments of labour – particularly those which are themselves hand-crafted – are as vital in forging a connection with the land on the page as they are in the field. As the editor of the eco-poetic anthology *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet* (2005), Oswald indicates her participation within a long history of writing with hand tools. In her introduction, she dedicates the book to the ‘dew’s harp [which] is a rake (in old Devon dialect)’, a tool which she sees as ‘a rhythmical but not predictable instrument that connects the earth to our hands’.⁴⁶ The phrase ‘rhythmical but not predictable’ is one which characterises Oswald’s own eco-prosody. Indeed, raking gives rise to the same multi-dimensional experience as that of reading a rhythmically complex poem; when raking a landscape the sound of human activity is counterpointed against that of the nature, enabling the individual to ‘hear right into the non-human world [...] as if you and trees had found a meeting point in the sound of the

⁴⁵ Deakin, *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*, 163.

⁴⁶ Alice Oswald, ‘Introduction: A Dew’s Harp,’ *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), ix.

rake'.⁴⁷ The collection is full of work poems, and the 'dew's harp', with its musical and technical associations, finds its voice in a number of hand tools throughout, most notably in the form of Robert Frost's 'long scythe whispering to the ground' in 'Mowing', which in its mutterings appears to speak a non-human language.⁴⁸ Commenting upon the mutual roles of gardening and writing, Oswald observes that

when you're digging you become bodily implicated in the ground's world [...] you move alongside it for maybe eight hours and your spade's language (it speaks in short lines of trochees and dactyls: sscrunch turn slot slot, sscrunch turn slot slot) creeps and changes at the same pace as the soil.⁴⁹

Oswald's prosodic sounding of the spade-action is reminiscent of Heaney's *ars poetica* on the subject, 'Digging', which features the speaker's father 'stooping in rhythm', unearthing the onomatopoeic 'squelch and slap / Of soggy peat'.⁵⁰ Heaney is another a central figure in Oswald's anthology. However, whereas Heaney places his emphasis on the pen ('Between my finger and my thumb / the squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it'), and therefore on the poem as visual entity on the page, Oswald's emphasis is firmly on the poem as acoustic phenomenon.⁵¹

Critical of the visual connotations of landscape, Tim Ingold delineates an environment experienced through work with the term 'taskscape':

The landscape seems to be what we *see* around us, whereas the taskscape is what we *hear* [...] whereas both the landscape and the taskscape presuppose the presence of an agent who watches and listens, the taskscape must be populated with beings who are themselves agents, and who reciprocally 'act back' in the process of their own dwelling. In other words, the taskscape exists not just as activity but as *interactivity*.⁵²

⁴⁷ Alice Oswald, 'Introduction: A Dew's Harp,' ix.

⁴⁸ Robert Frost, 'Mowing', in *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 144.

⁴⁹ Oswald, 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise', 40.

⁵⁰ Seamus Heaney, 'Digging', *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 3-4.

⁵¹ Heaney, 'Digging', 4.

⁵² Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*, 199.

Ingold's 'taskscape' is founded upon Heidegger's principle that 'to build is in itself already to dwell.'⁵³ In *Dart*, Oswald populates her poem with agents who through their role as labourers are active in their own dwelling. Among the many voices that flow through its protean narrative are that of a forester, a worker at a woollen mill, a water abstractor, a dairy worker, a sewage worker, a boat builder and significantly a 'stonewaller'. The result is a comprehensive example of a 'taskscape' in verse. Tom Bristow attributes *Dart*'s 'inclusive' quality to Oswald's 'plural and organic consciousness [which] enables the poet to focus on labour as a communal phenomenon'.⁵⁴ Indeed, the river comes to represent not simply a geographical location but an entire working community. Oswald poetics is one which is fashioned in chorus with the inhabitants of Devon, and is reliant on their voices to provide her with the rhythms for her structures of dwelling. 'I've made barns, sheds, chicken houses, goose huts, whatever I require, just putting two and two together', says the 'stonewaller,' whose role as 'bricoleur' echoes that of Oswald as poet.⁵⁵ Due to the external sourcing of her rhythms, Oswald's poems come to resemble the stonewaller's improvised structures in that are made up almost entirely of recycled material. A key element of Oswald's fascination with Hughes's *Moortown Diary* is the spontaneous process of its composition, which manifests itself in a quality that Oswald identifies as 'more like documentary'.⁵⁶ An improvised form of field notes that echoes Hughes's *Moortown Diary*, *Dart* relinquishes authorial independence in favour of authorial interactivity. After all, as Oswald states in her introduction to the poem, 'all voices should be read as the river's mutterings' rather than her own.⁵⁷

⁵³ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 144.

⁵⁴ Tom Bristow, "'Contracted to an eye-quiet world": Sonic Census or Poetics of Place in Alice Oswald,' *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations* 10, no. 2 (October 2006): 174, 173.

⁵⁵ Oswald, *Dart*, 33.

⁵⁶ Oswald, 'Wild things.'

⁵⁷ Oswald, *Dart*, i.

As Oswald demonstrates, the ‘taskscape’ can be known and experienced both personally and communally. Oswald’s ‘Pruning in Frost’, with its ‘working’ title a homage to a tradition of manual-labourer poets, evokes a personal encounter with the land through work:

Oh I am
stone thumbs,
feet of glass.

Work knocks in me the winter’s nail.

The imprint of human activity upon nature results in the imprint of nature upon the individual. The heavily syncopated stresses in these lines punch holes in the flow of the rhythm. The speaker is quite literally pinned to the landscape by the accumulation of single syllable words and the onomatopoeic ‘knocks.’ The subsequent shift to an iambic pattern, with ‘in me the winter’s nail’, evokes the repetitive soundtrack of working with hand tools. These lines are harsh and uncomfortable to read: oscillating between the pausing mode and an iambic rhythm, the voice is forced into irregular shapes. The standard-issue instrument for a ‘stonewaller’ is a walling-hammer, a tool that is sharpened into a chisel at one end and has a striking face at the other, allowing its user both to chip away and to hammer into place irregular building blocks. For Oswald, the ability to shape and construct poetic forms relies on hand tools such as these. ‘Pruning in Frost’ is as much about sculpting an experience for the listener as it is about shaping organic matter.

‘My ideal has always been to create a sound world’, says Oswald, ‘so I’m continually referring everything to the ears and the voice and the channels between’.⁵⁸ If Oswald’s poems are sonic structures then hand-tools are her tuning devices. For Oswald, practical instruments are also musical instruments that accompany language in much the same way that the lyre

⁵⁸ Bunting and Oswald, ‘Alice Oswald on the Devonshire landscape: “There’s a terror in beauty”.’

would have accompanied the oral poets as they recited *The Iliad*. Another poem from her first collection, 'The Glass House', ends with the lines:

Then far off
comes the cluck-sound of this green can
dipping and spilling . . .
and dipping again.⁵⁹

Here, the centrifugal backwards and forwards slosh of the water in the can sends the rhythm spilling over the edges of the lines. It is as though the poem can hardly contain its form, with the heavy assonance and consonance creating a non-verbal musicality. The onomatopoeic 'cluck-sound' heralds the soundtrack of the working world, a rhythmical but unpredictable music which works upon the listener like a series of waves. Angela Leighton argues that 'seeing is easy. It is listening which touches on the hard work of understanding what we read, since listening is an attention to the changing, harmonic depths of language'.⁶⁰ Oswald uses the tools of her craft to mine these depths, unearthing a sublanguage of rhythm in the process. It is also important to note that the excavation of this language is dependent upon the hard work of the listener. Indeed, the interactive nature of Oswald's poetics extends beyond the act of composition and includes the listener in its processes.

Even more so than in the case of *The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile*, Oswald's second full lyric collection, *Woods etc.* (2005), is a work designed for the ear. In 'Owl', the speaker listens for an owl's call in the middle of the night and in the process is transported to 'the woods again':

poised, seeing my eyes seen,
hearing my listening heard

under a huge tree improvised by fear

⁵⁹ Alice Oswald, 'The Glass House', *The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile*, 4.

⁶⁰ Angela Leighton, 'Thresholds of Attention: On Listening and Literature,' in *Thinking on Thresholds: The Poetics of Transitive Spaces*, ed. Subha Mukherji (London: Anthem Press, 2011), 201.

dead brush falling then a star
straight through to God
founded and fixed the wood⁶¹

Here, the reciprocal act of ‘hearing’ and being ‘heard’ recalls the interactivity of the ‘taskscape’. For Oswald, to listen is to be self-aware, conscious of one’s presence in the environment. Without an active effort on behalf of the listener, the presence of those other listeners – the owl, the trees, even the transcendental ear of God – remains undetected. In ‘Owl’, the speaker is poised ‘under a huge tree improvised by fear’. It is important to remember from Oswald’s encounter with Wyatt that any structure ‘improvised by fear’ incorporates silence into its architecture. There is no protective canopy or roof in Oswald’s poems, no barrier that separates the listener from the outdoors. Instead, her poems work to expose the listener to the elements through the use of gaps and hesitations. The uncanny half-rhyming of ‘fear’ and ‘star’, and also of ‘God’ and ‘wood’ above, emphasises the disquieting effect that comes as a result of listening to the void between words.

By the time she writes *Woods etc.*, Oswald’s gap-stone style takes on an almost existential significance. In these lines, taken from a poem about a night walk, entitled ‘Field’, Oswald locates the world in a gap between two stones:

a brick of earth, a block of sky,
there lay the world, wedged
between its premise and its conclusion

some star let go a small sound on a thread.⁶²

Here, the emphasis placed upon the single syllable words ‘brick’ and ‘block’ illustrates how the simplicity of Oswald’s technique allows space for larger, more complex questions to be asked of the outdoor experience. Positioned between the ‘earth’ and the ‘sky’, the listener’s

⁶¹ Alice Oswald, ‘Owl,’ in *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 6.

⁶² Alice Oswald, ‘Field’, in *Woods etc.*, 25.

exposure to the environment is one that is heard and felt, rather than rationalised. Lacking the rationale of regular syntax, Oswald relies upon other means to make her poems stand up. Here, the ‘small sound on a thread’ let go by the heavens, provides the fibre of otherness which Oswald uses to weave her texts together. The dry stone composition of Oswald’s poems mean that they achieve a rare flexibility:

I came up with the idea of a mobile poem, in which verses would float free of any particular order: a variable assembly of fixed phrases [...] You might call it a ‘working’ poem, in the sense that you can see the movement going on between groups of words.⁶³

The final lines of ‘Field’ are comprised of a list of words independent of any syntax: ‘burial, widowed, moonless, seeping / docks, grasses, small windflowers, weepholes, wires’. This is dry-stone syntax in all its barren extremity. Spoken as a series of incantations these rhythmical blocks are written so that they may be endlessly re-assembled, creating a truly interactive prosody. This is also where Oswald transcends her influences, laying the groundwork for her own oral tradition.

Once freed from the bonds of syntax, Oswald is able to expand the rhythmical possibilities of her versification. ‘Birdsong for Two Voices’ verbally re-enacts the rhythms of a music ‘sung reciprocally by two birds at intervals / in the same tree but not quite in time’.⁶⁴ The poem represents an assemblage of the various techniques at Oswald’s disposal. Assembling and then re-assembling ‘the earth / out of nine notes and silence’, Oswald dismantles the pentameter line only to reformulate it with the emphasis on the pause. Counterpoint is a key feature here, as Oswald weaves together different rhythms to achieve a jazz-like dissonance:

letting the pieces fall where they may,
every dawn divides into the distinct
misgiving between alternate voices

⁶³ Oswald, ‘The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise’, 41-42.

⁶⁴ Alice Oswald, ‘Birdsong for Two Voices’, *Woods etc.*, 5.

sung repeatedly by two birds at intervals
out of nine notes and silence.

Letting 'the pieces fall where they may', Oswald achieves a versification of improvisation. Seemingly arranged out of a series of 'fixed phrases', 'Birdsong for Two Voices' creates the impression that it is being constructed in the moment that it is spoken. As a result, the moving parts of the poem remain exposed, allowing the listener unprecedented access to Oswald's working methods. Echoing 'The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile', Oswald makes use of antiphony to put the two 'alternate voices' in conversation with each other. The point at which they touch becomes a contact point for the listener and the soundscape, a space which reverberates with a cacophony of noises:

it gathers the yard with its echoes and scaffolding sounds,
it gathers the swerving away sound of the road,
it gathers the river shivering in a wet field,
it gathers the three small bones in the dark of the eardrum;

The anaphoric scaffolding of this quatrain grants the listener a sweeping survey of the soundscape. Oswald's stone wall style finds its significance in contact: the contact point between Oswald and tradition, between poet and reader, and between distinct rhythmical blocks. Ultimately though, Oswald's eco-prosody plays upon the minute but crucial connection between 'three small bones in the dark of the eardrum'. For Oswald, the ear is the most intricate and profound dry-stone structure of them all, and is the model on which all her structures are based. Oswald's poems, which themselves feature an array of anvils, hammers and stirrups, at first may appear simple in their construction, in fact they are sensitive to the slightest of vibrations.